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'No Civilians. Everyone's a Terrorist': IDF Soldiers Expose Arbitrary Killings and Rampant Lawlessness in Gaza's Netzarim Corridor

'Of 200 bodies, only 10 were confirmed as Hamas members': IDF soldiers who served in Gaza tell Haaretz that anyone who crosses an imaginary line in the contested Neztarim corridor is shot to death, with every Palestinian casualty counting as a terrorist – even if they were just a child

An Israeli soldier in the area of the Netzarim corridor, in Gaza. Credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit / Image processing: Masha Tzur-Glozman

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Yaniv Kubovich
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The line appears on no map and exists in no official military order. While senior Israel Defense Forces officials might deny its existence, in the heart of the Gaza Strip, north of the Netzarim corridor, nothing is more real.

"The forces in the field call it 'the line of dead bodies'" a commander in Division 252 tells Haaretz. "After shootings, bodies are not collected, attracting packs of dogs who come to eat them. In Gaza, people know that wherever you see these dogs, that's where you must not go."

The Netzarim corridor, a seven-kilometer-wide strip of land, stretches from near Kibbutz Be'eri to the Mediterranean coast. The IDF has emptied this area of Palestinian residents and demolished their homes to construct military roads and military positions.

Destroyed houses in the Netzarim corridor area, April. Credit: Ashraf Amra / ANADOLU / Anadolu / AFP

While Palestinians are officially prohibited from entering, the reality is more severe than a simple exclusion zone. "It's military whitewashing," explains a senior officer in Division 252, who has served three reserve rotations in Gaza. "The division commander designated this area as a 'kill zone.' Anyone who enters is shot."

A recently discharged Division 252 officer describes the arbitrary nature of this boundary: "For the division, the kill zone extends as far as a sniper can see." But the issue goes beyond geography. "We're killing civilians there who are then counted as terrorists," he says. "The IDF spokesperson's announcements about casualty numbers have turned this into a competition between units. If Division 99 kills 150 [people], the next unit aims for 200."

These accounts of indiscriminate killing and the routine classification of civilian casualties as terrorists emerged repeatedly in Haaretz's conversations with recent Gaza veterans.

"Calling ourselves the world's most moral army absolves soldiers who know exactly what we're doing," says a senior reserve commander who has recently returned from the Netzarim corridor. "It means ignoring that for over a year, we've operated in a lawless space where human life holds no value. Yes, we

commanders and combatants are participating in the atrocity unfolding in Gaza. Now everyone must face this reality."

While this officer doesn't regret mobilizing after October 7 ("we went into a just war"), he insists the Israeli public deserves the full picture. "People need to know what this war really looks like, what serious acts some commanders and fighters are committing inside Gaza. They need to know the inhuman scenes we're witnessing."

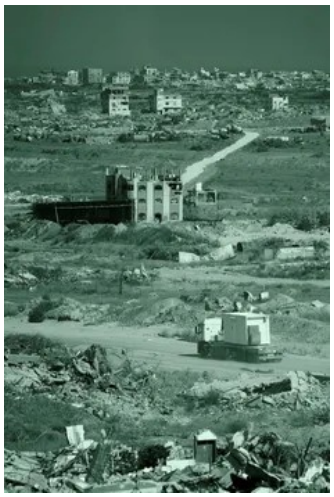
Haaretz has gathered testimonies from active-duty soldiers, career officers, and reservists that reveal the unprecedented authority given to commanders. As the IDF operates across multiple fronts, division commanders have received expanded powers. Previously, bombing buildings or launching airstrikes required approval from the IDF chief of staff. Now, such decisions can be made by lower-ranking officers.

"Division commanders now have almost unlimited firepower authority in combat zones," explains a veteran officer in Division 252. "A battalion commander can order drone strikes, and a division commander can launch conquest operations." Some sources describe IDF units operating like independent militias, unrestricted by standard military protocols.

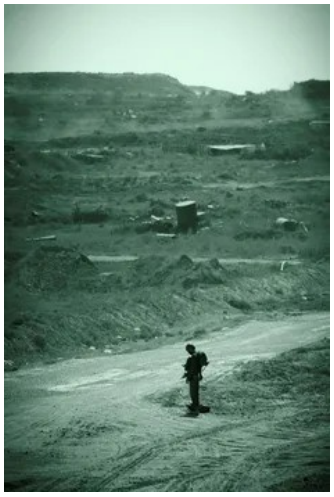
The Nahal combat brigade in the Netzarim Corridor. Credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

'We took him to the cage'

The chaotic reality has repeatedly forced commanders and fighters to face severe moral dilemmas. "The order was clear: 'Anyone crossing the bridge into the [Netzarim] corridor gets a bullet in the head,'" recalls a veteran fighter from Division 252.



The Gaza Strip, September.
Credit: David Bachar



The Netzarim corridor in Gaza.
Credit: David Bachar

"One time, guards spotted someone approaching from the south. We responded as if it was a large militant raid. We took positions and just opened fire. I'm talking about dozens of bullets, maybe more. For about a minute or two, we just kept shooting at the body. People around me were shooting and laughing."

Philadelphi and Netzarim, the two 'corridors' blocking a Gaza-Israel cease-fire

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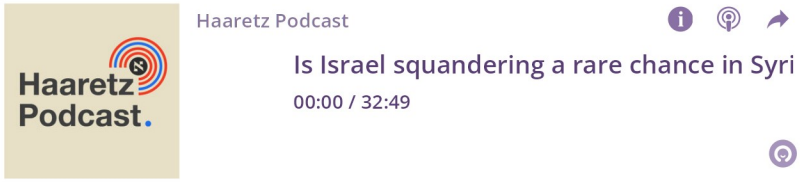


But the incident didn't end there. "We approached the blood-covered body, photographed it, and took the phone. He was just a boy, maybe 16." An intelligence officer collected the items, and hours later, the fighters learned the boy wasn't a Hamas operative – but just a civilian.

"That evening, our battalion commander congratulated us for killing a terrorist, saying he hoped we'd kill ten more tomorrow," the fighter adds. "When someone pointed out he was unarmed and looked like a civilian, everyone shouted him down. The commander said: 'Anyone crossing the line is a terrorist, no exceptions, no civilians. Everyone's a terrorist.' This deeply troubled me – did I leave my home to sleep in a mouse-infested building for this? To shoot unarmed people?"

Similar incidents continue to surface. An officer in Division 252's command recalls when the IDF spokesperson announced their forces had killed over 200 militants. "Standard procedure requires photographing bodies and collecting details when possible, then sending evidence to intelligence to verify militant status or at least confirm they were killed by the IDF," he explains. "Of those 200 casualties, only ten were confirmed as known Hamas operatives. Yet no one questioned the public announcement about killing hundreds of militants."

Smoke rises above the Nezarim corridor area, August. Credit: Eyad BABA / AFP

Another fighter describes witnessing four unarmed people walking normally, spotted by a surveillance drone. Despite clearly not appearing as militants, a tank advanced and opened fire with its machine gun. "Hundreds of bullets," he recalls. Three died immediately ("the sight haunts me," he says), while the fourth survived and raised his hands in surrender.

"We put him in a cage set up near our position, stripped off his clothes, and left him there," the soldier recounts. "Soldiers passing by spat on him. It was disgusting. Finally, a military interrogator came, questioned him briefly while holding a gun to his head, then ordered his release." The man had simply been trying to reach his uncles in northern Gaza. "Later, officers praised us for killing 'terrorists.' I couldn't understand what they meant," the fighter says.

After a day or two, the bodies were buried by a bulldozer in the sand. "I don't know if anyone remembers they're there. People don't understand – this doesn't just kill Arabs, it kills us too. If called back to Gaza, I don't think I'll go."

In another incident, observation posts spotted two people walking toward Wadi Gaza, an area designated as restricted. A drone revealed they were carrying a white flag and walking with raised

hands. The deputy battalion commander ordered troops to shoot to kill. When one commander protested, pointing out the white flag and suggesting they might be hostages, he was overruled. "I don't know what a white flag is, shoot to kill," the deputy commander, a reservist from Brigade 5, insisted. The two people eventually turned back south, but the protesting commander was berated as a coward.

IDF activities in the Netzarim corridor. Credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

These invisible boundaries north and south of the corridor appear frequently in testimonies. Even soldiers manning ambush positions say they weren't always clear where these lines were drawn. "Anyone approaching whatever line was decided at that moment is considered a threat – no permission needed to shoot."

This approach isn't limited to Division 252. A Division 99 reservist describes watching a drone feed showing "an adult with two children crossing the forbidden line." They were walking unarmed, seemingly searching for something. "We had them under complete surveillance with the drone and weapons aimed at them – they couldn't do anything," he says. "Suddenly we heard a massive explosion. A combat helicopter had fired a missile at them. Who thinks it's legitimate to fire a missile at children? And with a helicopter? This is pure evil."

Most commanders interviewed say the air force initially acted as a restraining force, especially regarding drone strikes. They would refuse attacks on unconfirmed targets, populated areas, and humanitarian shelters. However, this caution eroded over time. "The air force barely questions anything anymore; their safety

mechanisms have collapsed too," one commander states.

Division 252 found ways around air force oversight using a "magic word" – the "flash procedure," an officer familiar with operations explains. Designed for forces under fire or evacuating casualties, it guarantees an airstrike within 30 minutes with no approvals needed. Any officer from battalion commander up could invoke it. "When targeting requests were denied for various reasons, Brigadier General Yehuda Vach would tell us to use the 'flash procedure,'" the officer says.

Wild West on Steroids

Vach, 45, born in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, rose through elite military units before commanding the IDF's Officers Training School. Promoted to brigadier general last summer, he took charge of Division 252. His first address to commanders at a corridor outpost revealed much.

Yehuda Vach, the former commander of Bahad 1, the Israeli military's training school for officers. Credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

"His worldview and political positions were clearly driving his operational decisions," a veteran officer present recalls. Another officer described him as a "small Napoleon" unsuited for division command: "The role requires judgment ... we knew immediately he lacked it, but didn't realize how badly."

Days later, Vach declared "there are no innocents in Gaza," according to one officer. While such sentiment isn't uncommon among soldiers, with Vach "it wasn't just opinion – it became

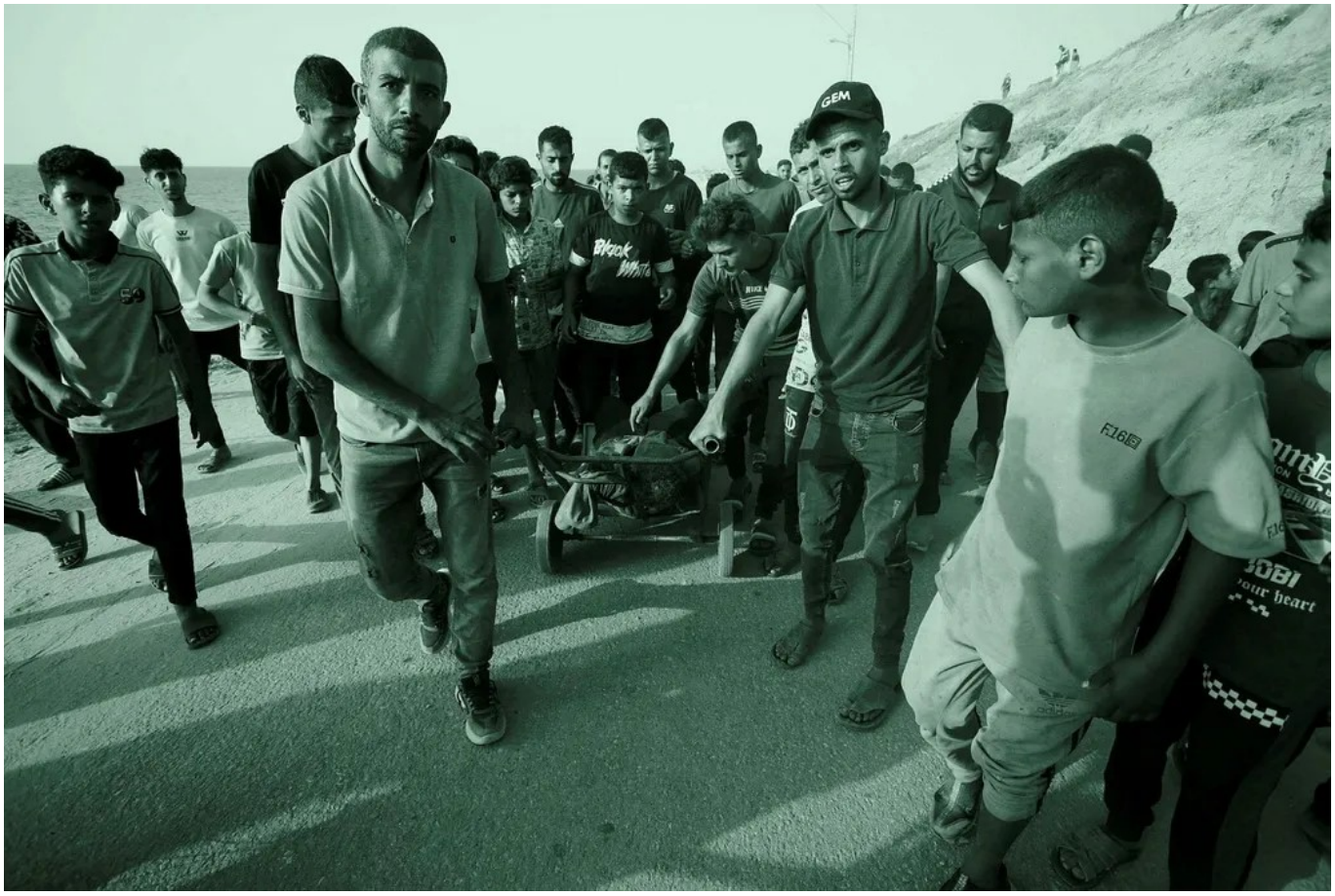
operational doctrine: everyone's a terrorist." He told his commanders that "in the Middle East, victory comes through conquering territory. We must keep conquering until we win."

Under Vach, the Wild West atmosphere intensified. The "kill zone" boundary shifted constantly – "500 meters here today, 500 meters there tomorrow," says one fighter. While other units also broke rules, officers say Vach went further.

One of the concepts he introduced was declaring anyone entering the kill zone a terrorist conducting reconnaissance. "Every woman is a scout, or a man in disguise," an officer explains. "Vach even decided anyone on a bicycle could be killed, claiming cyclists were terrorists' collaborators."

His private initiative to forcibly move northern Gaza's population south lacked official authorization. "We searched for operational orders but found nothing," a command officer says. "They eventually stopped him."

After reports of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's death, Vach shared disturbing fantasies during a command briefing about mutilating and desecrating the body. "How they should have stripped him, placed him in the city square, cut up the corpse and wash it in sewage water. He tried to explain how to cut and dismember the body," an officer recalls. "This wasn't a joke – this was a formal assessment meeting. His commanders stood shocked silent,"



Palestinians carrying people wounded after IDF airstrikes near the Netzarim corridor, May. Credit: Ashraf Amra / ANADOLU / Anadolu / AFP

Division staff repeatedly sought intervention from Southern Command chief Major General Yaron Finkelman over Vach's conduct, but Vach seemed to disregard even Finkelman's authority.

In early November, Vach's division left the corridor, replaced by Division 99. Before their final rotation ended, officers demanded explanations for his unauthorized "kill line" and other actions. "This is unprecedented – conducting war with everyone doing whatever they want in their sector. Operations launched without proper orders or procedures, just because Vach decided," an officer present says.

Vach obsessed over a "an image of victory" – not Israel's, but his own. He believed emptying northern Gaza of Palestinians would be his triumph. "We didn't meet the goal," he admitted in December. His attempt to drive out 250,000 residents clinging to their homes largely failed, with only hundreds crossing south.

He told officers that Palestinians must lose their land to learn from Hamas' October 7 massacre. "First he talked about expelling everyone south, thinking he'd implement the Generals' Plan alone," a commander recalls. When that proved impossible, he sought alternatives. None materialized.

In March, Vach is set to return with Division 252 to the Netzarim corridor.

The IDF on Thursday denied the statements attributed to Vach, saying that the army "has been operating for several months in the [Netzarim] corridor area in central Gaza against the Hamas terrorist organization, carrying out intensive operational activity. All activities and operations of IDF forces in Gaza, including in the Netzarim corridor, are carried out in accordance with established command procedures, with plans approved, and operational orders given by the highest level of command.

"All strikes in the area are conducted in accordance with the required protocols, including targeting objectives that are struck within a short time frame due to operational circumstances," the IDF continued.

The army added that "the strikes are targeted solely at military objectives, and before the strikes are carried out, many steps are taken to minimize harm to non-combatants." The IDF also said that incidents suspected of deviating from IDF orders and ethical guidelines are investigated and handled.

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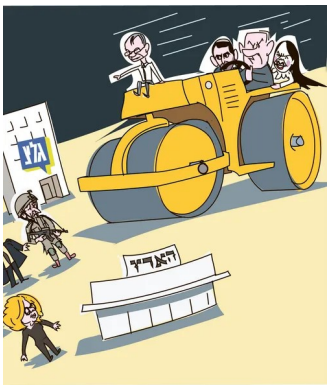

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